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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest dilemmas about implementing competency-based training in Child Studies, as prescribed by the Australian National Training Authority, is not what is stated in the training packages but what is left unsaid--the underlying assumptions. Issues such as cultural beliefs and attitudes are addressed, but generally only at the level of "variable." The culture ("other" culture) is considered as a variation within the framework of the competencies, but the cultural construction of the competencies themselves is not considered. Students in child studies classes should be taught to challenge the assumptions of the competencies by interrogating the underlying meanings of different practices, questioning the obvious, and being aware of the possibility of multiple understandings so that they can better understand and work with the children they will teach. For example, the instructor can present examples such as child abuse, immunization, "guiding" children, safety issues, and multiple interpretations of child behavior and challenge students to decide how they should be handled and what other interpretations they may not have considered. In this area of competency-based training, postmodernism and internationalization must be factored into classroom practice in order to inspire in students a spirit of inquiry and lifelong learning. (KC)

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Embracing postmodernism in classroom practice

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Background

When I returned to university to studies in the late nineties after a gap of almost twenty years, I felt what can best be described as 'culture' shock. Indeed, it seemed like a foreign country with different beliefs, different rules, different technology and even a different language. I had to learn how to decipher the works of Habermas and Foucault, engage with the developments in feminist thought and contemplate the wholly new terrain of postcolonialism. But unlike a holiday to an exotic destination, I was not allowed to view this as a break from my 'real' life. The course requirements directed me to examine and develop my professional practice in the light of this new experience; an integration was demanded.

At the same time, in the real world of the classroom I was being directed to follow the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) down the road of Competency Based Training. This certainly made for an interesting challenge; to review and develop my practice from a postmodernist perspective whilst implementing a model of teaching that appeared to be strongly imbedded in a modernist construction of knowledge.

Also impinging on the classroom was a growing move towards internationalisation which was defined by TAFE as:

> a process that prepares TAFE and its students for successful participation in an increasingly interdependent world. The process should permeate all facets of the work of TAFE fostering global understanding and developing skills, attitudes, and values for effective living and working in a diverse world. It should link to the multicultural reality of Australian society and contribute to the capability of Australian industry in competing in a global economy.
> (Australia TAFE International 1996, p 4)

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The approach

One of the greatest dilemmas about implementing competency-based training in Child Studies is not what is stated in the training packages but what is left unsaid; the underlying assumptions. Issues such as cultural beliefs and attitudes, for example, are addressed, but generally only at the level of 'variable'. This means that culture (ie 'other' culture) is considered as a variation within the framework of the competencies, but the cultural construction of the competencies themselves is not considered (a marginalist approach to cultural diversity).

In my work with students, I try to problematise the notion that the competencies are simple applications of the 'truth' by attempting to uncover the underlying beliefs and values. I do this by encouraging students to:

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a) interrogate the underlying meanings of 'different' practices;
b) question the 'obvious'; and
c) be aware of the possibility of multiple understandings.

Examples

Example 1: Exploring 'different' practices

Element 1 of the competency 'Support the rights and safety of children within duty of care requirements' (CHCCHILD2A) states that students should 'identify indicators of abuse and act appropriately'. Underpinning this element appears to be the assumption that there is a common universally accepted definition of what constitutes abuse, but this definition is conspicuous in its absence.

This becomes problematic when students are confronted by practices that challenge their personal 'common sense' definition of abuse. On a number of occasions in classes, the practice of 'coining' has been raised. Some students (usually from the dominant cultural background) are adamant that this is definitely 'abuse', whereas others (usually from an Asian background) perceive it to be a 'health practice'. Rather than attempting to smooth over this dilemma, I attempt to utilise it as a tool to stimulate students to reflect more deeply on the whole notion of 'abuse'.

Initially the class works on developing a definition of abuse that they can all agree on; eg 'an action that harms a child'. Using this definition, the practice is then examined using de Bono's (1985) P M I process, with the whole group contributing. This then identifies a whole series of underlying criteria that students are using to make the decision as to whether the practice is abusive or not, eg the physical consequence of the action, the intention of the actor, the perception of the child, the location of the action, the interpretation of the action etc.

Students are then given further dilemmas to analyse using the criteria they have developed:

a) is immunisation abuse?
b) is acupuncture abuse?
c) would a parent who believed immunisation to be harmful but assented due to social pressure be guilty of abuse?

Students are then encouraged to reflect on their original definition and to develop a more complex set of ideas about what constitutes abuse. I then relate to students an incident which challenged my notions of child 'sexual' abuse, particularly in regards to the possible multiple interpretations of the event.

The danger in this approach is that students will become so confused that they will be paralysed to act (with possibly disastrous consequences for the child), whilst the danger of not considering this is that students will act without due thought (with equally disastrous consequences - see Reid et al 1990, p 138).

Example 2: Questioning the obvious

Competency CHCIC2A is: 'Guide children's behaviour'. Rather than launching straight into teaching techniques, I begin by asking the students to answer the question 'to where?' This encourages students to identify the underpinning philosophy that predicates all that they do in regard to children's behaviour.

Commonly, students respond with notions about autonomy and self-actualisation etc which are derived from their studies of developmental theorists such as Erikson and Maslow. I then share with them the words of Shin-Ichi Terashima from Ryuuku University's school of Medicine.

> To distinguish oneself from others, or to live, as idiom has it 'outside the mosquito net', is to be condemned to an isolated lonely existence. The norm is to accept one's position in a hierarchical society and to abdicate decision-making to others. (quoted in Cornell 2000, p 26)

This then raises the proposition that there may be alternate goals for child development and raises the question: who decides?

Next, I ask students to answer the question 'why do children need to be guided?'. This has provoked some interesting underlying philosophical questions, eg are children born 'bad' and need to be helped (or punished?) to become good, as seems implied in some Christian doctrines? Are they born 'good' and need to be protected from the 'badness' as has been explained to me by Hindu parents in Bali? Are children born inexperienced and need to be allowed to make mistakes from which they will learn, or should they be protected from making mistakes?

Element 1 of competency CHCIC10A ('Establish plans for developing responsible behaviour') requires students to identify and review behaviour causing concern. The criteria for this identification, however, is left unstated', as is the obvious question 'concern for whom?'

Initially I explore with the students the criteria for deciding whether a behaviour is a problem. Generally the students come up with the categories of safety, interfering with the rights of others, respect for the environment and (sometimes) social standards. These ideas are then probed with further questions and disparate examples.

Regarding safety, I pose these questions:

- Do you think children should be kept absolutely safe?
- What situation would be required to keep a child absolutely safe?
- What is an acceptable level of risk? Who should determine it and how?

Students are then ask to consider examples of practices drawn from my observations, such as:

- A local child care centre where 4 year-olds weren't allowed to use table knives;
- a local Montessori kindergarten, in which 3 year-olds were encouraged to cut fruit with sharp knives; and
- a Fijian Island community, where I witnessed pre-school children competently cutting the tops off coconuts with cane knives.

The other criteria are then discussed in similar fashion.

Example 3: multiple understandings

After input on the four goals of misbehaviour - as derived from the work of Dreikus (1968 cited in Gartrell 1994), students are given the following scenario from the learning guides to analyse:

Jack (5 years)

> At morning tea time when other children are sitting at the table to have their morning tea snack, Jack just sits. Jack waits, and waits, and waits. He looks at the food, but he *doesn't do anything*. He sits in an apathetic manner. Finally, a caregiver comes over and says to Jack "Are you going to have something to eat, Jack?" Jack just mumbles. She takes the biscuit and cheese from the plate and puts it on Jack's plate saying "There you are Jack. Come on, you poor little thing. Here's a biscuit for you. You can eat it up." This sort of behaviour becomes a pattern for Jack so that when he is asked to put his clothes or boots on to go outside he is unable.

Generally the students' analysis concurs with that of the learning guide; that Jack has learnt to 'belong through gaining attention and recognition by being incapable and unable'. I then propose to the students that Jack is actually this child's 'English' name; his birth name is Zulkifli and that he has recently come from Indonesia. He only speaks Javanese and hasn't been in group care before, as previously he was looked after by the family's pembantu (servant).

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I explain to the students that in my experience of Indonesian society, it is considered bad manners to eat or drink anything placed in front of you until you are expressly invited to do so. I also suggest that cheese might not be a familiar (and possibly not an acceptable) food to Zulkifli.

I then recount to students a story told to me by a postgraduate engineering student about the problems his daughter had faced with the expectations of autonomy in day care in Australia and the further problems he anticipated for her in readjusting when they returned to Indonesia.

Students are then asked to reassess their analysis in the light of this added information, with many determining that the 'problem' has inappropriate expectations on the part of the workers.

Conclusion

What I have presented are illustrations of how I have tried to integrate my understandings of postmodernism and internationalisation into classroom practice in this era of competency-based training. My aim is to present these ideas in ways that are accessible to certificate and diploma-level students, as I am concerned that much of the literature is difficult to decipher, and in practice exclusionary.

Overarching all of this, however, is my conviction that my role as an educator is not just to transfer skills, but to inspire in students a spirit of inquiry. As child care workers, I want them to continue to observe, read, reflect, discuss, question and challenge - this to me is the real meaning of 'learning on the job' and 'lifelong learning'.

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